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Publication date:
2014

Document Version
Accepted author manuscript, peer reviewed version

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Hansen, K. T. (2014). *Danish independent film, or how to make films without public funding*. Paper presented at ECREA 2014: 5th European Communication Conference, Lissabon, Portugal.

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Danish independent film, or how to make films without public funding

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Paper at ECREA 2014, November, Lisbon

Throughout the past almost two decades we have seen a developing challenge to the typical way of producing a film in Denmark. Small production companies shoot up everywhere. Some of them are very critical of the public Danish film funding system, while others are trying to build a career as a Danish film producer. One key inspiration for many of the directors in – what has now become known as – *Danish independent film* is the American director Robert Rodriguez and especially his book *Rebel without a crew* (1995). The book is a diary of his first successful feature film production *El mariachi* (1992) and, basically, here he outlines a very different do-it-yourself-method of film production. This DIY-culture has very much provided Danish film subcultures with a bible and an idol to look up to. In other words, Rodriguez's book has for some film directors become a stimulating guidebook.

Let me, however, first take you through a quick taster of a typical Danish feature film funding. Danish film funding has a prehistory that goes back to the 1930's. In the aftermath of the First World War and the shrinking of the success of Danish silent cinema, Danish film policy makers realized that a small nation film production, if it were to survive international competition, was in need of a national funding system. Throughout the next decades, new institutions emerge and the system changes into a centralized funding system in the 1990's when three large institutions were merged into The Danish Film

Institute (DFI). When you make a film in Denmark, the typical way to go about it is to apply for funding at the film institute. And if you – as a producer – don't have a very large sum of money in advance, the ordinary way go about applying for funding is to go through the consultant system. Here, a film consultant at the film institute can recommend funding for a particular film, but often before this a negotiation of form and content may take place. For some critics, the result of this system is that it may seem like it is the same directors that receive funds time and again.

Danish film institutions have, hence, been marked by debates and critique throughout the entire history, but soon after the centralization of the institutions in The Danish Film Institute we saw the first sprouts of an independent cinema surface. Danish independent filmmakers define themselves as independent if they make films without public funding. Basically, this underlines the fact that film independency, as a concept, needs a contextual approach. In other words, whenever a filmmaker claims to be independent, it is necessary to ask: *from what?* In a contemporary Danish context the answer most often is: *from the film institute*. When you make an independent film in Denmark, you make a film without public funding.

It was, in many ways, by accident that I – six years ago – came across this idea of a Danish indiefilm. I reviewed two films for a Danish magazine, where I labelled the films as *amateur film productions*. I was inspired by the work of Ryan Shand on *amateur cinema* and I found the concept adequate for small productions by two directors without film education. Soon after, I was contacted by one the actors in one of the films with an almost hostile message telling me that the filmmakers were *not* amateurs. Almost all within the particular production had some connection to the Danish film business – for in-

stance as co-editors, runners, light or camera crew etc. However, they found the typical way of funding film too intimate and controlling, which was why they had attempted to make a low budget film without public funding. Today – six years after – the actor is a film director, film producer with his own company as well as an actor, and he has until now made three feature films and seven short films. In his book on *Independent Cinema* D.K. Holm refers to – among other competing definition – the concept 'indiefilm' as a marketing tool.

And the actor that contacted me may have reacted to the fact that the idea of 'amateur film' can have a derogatory connotation while the concept 'indiefilm' has much more intentional and conscious associations. However, the enquiry from the actor-cum-director became a new prism through which I started to view Danish underground film and film productions in Denmark that rarely gains a voice in the debate about Danish cinema. Of course, I myself became a victim of 'indiefilm as a marketing tool', but I soon realized that there were a lot of films out there that lived a life in obscurity. And until today I have counted almost fifty Danish feature fiction films and seventy short fiction films by directors and small film companies that in one way or the other can be labelled as independent.

Do we find historical precursors to this tendency in Danish cinema? Well, yes we do. In the post-youth revolt sixties, the film commune ABCinema, with members such as Jørgen Leth and Per Kirkeby, as an institutional protest made experimental 8mm films without public money. In protest, in 1969 they tried to occupy the still fairly new Danish film school. However, unsuccessful they were at that they caused a few changes in the film law some years later. In the seventies and eighties, the Danish director Christian Braad Thomsen – a student at the film school at the time of the ABCinema occupation attempt – made

films without public funding as a direct protest towards the support system. He found the system to strangle creativity. In the nineties, more precisely in 1995, the dogma movement was launched and, for some today, the dogma films and the films from Zentropa are considered critical towards the system. However, they were granted public funding for the films. But none of these historical examples ever used the concept of 'indiefilm' as a self-description. Employment of the concept does not take off until some years into the new millennium.

However, some of the filmmakers from just before the turn of the century are today active filmmakers in the Danish independent film. In the rise of the Danish independent scene the Danish-Chilean director Shaky González plays a pivotal role. His 1998 debut film *Angel of the Night* not only showed that it was possible to make feature films for Danish cinema distribution without funding from the film institute. His main inspiration for the film was Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino's *From Dusk till Dawn* (1995) and its significant blend of action films and horror cinema. Today, Shaky González is still an active player in Danish independent cinema. He never really describes himself as independent, but he underlines that if you're independent in Danish film, you're independent from the film institute.

Only one other independent film has since exceeded the comparative success in Danish cinema of González's debut film. His latest 2013 feature film *The Grey Gold* sold more tickets than his first film. However, Danish indiefilms are very rarely widely distributed in Danish cinemas. Some directors claim that the reason is that the largest Danish film producer Nordisk Film mostly controls the Danish national cinema system. Though, some films are shown in smaller cinemas, shown in cinemas for a shorter while, but most often the films are distributed directly on DVD or freely distributed on the Internet. The suc-

cess of the films is not particularly determined by large sales figures in the cinema. Instead, the directors may raise a little bit of cash producing one film and, then, they use the profit in their next film production. And this is basically very much in tune with the Robert Rodriguez method outlined in *Rebel without a crew*.

This way of producing a film is, of course, very tough and the production path is walking a tightrope. Some directors use the phrase 'death in postproduction' as a description of one the worst fears: not getting the film finished. So one basic question is of course: why would they put themselves through all this? In my interviews with filmmakers I roughly tend to get one out of two possible answers. One group of filmmakers make indiefilm as a protest towards the Danish funding system. And one group of filmmakers do it in order to gain access to the funding system. Basically, they seem like separate groups of filmmakers, but throughout a career we may actually see filmmakers on the move between the two groups. One other thing, however, come up very often in interviews with representatives from both groups: they all seem to be pursuing what is often termed 'creative freedom'. In spite of the hardship, many of the filmmakers in both groups like to be surrounded by other filmmakers that 'are dedicated to the film'. Shaky González has made films both with and without public funding and he claims that it is much easier to motivate a film crew on an indie production as opposed to a funded film. So even though the production process is strenuous and the cash box usually running on empty the creative enthusiasm about an independent film production seems to be the putty that is holding it all together.

Where is Danish independent film going now? Well, there are several tendencies. Some directors are pursuing festival audiences – and some

are very successful in doing that. Lately, the short film "Definitely Dead" (2012) and the feature film *Backgammon* (2014) has won significant prizes in American film festivals. Other directors launch their films for an international DVD audience. Here, the Danish director Kim Sørenholm may be the most successful. He has collaborated on several anthology horror films and he has produced action and horror films that have been picked up by American distribution. Recently, a crew of indie filmmakers attempted with some success to launch the first Danish found footage film *Encounters* (2014) in a similar fashion as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). The film has been touring smaller Danish screens and art cinemas during the fall of 2014.

A lot of the film directors are attempting to break new ground for Danish film because they find that the film institute very rarely has funded films that separate from the Danish mainstream of realism and art cinema. Genre cinema has, says many of the directors, had a hard time throughout the past decades which results in many horror films, action film and gangster films in the Danish independent scene. However, lately it seems likely that the institute has heard the critical voices. They have recently funded horror films, a western and crime fiction. And in the new political film agreement for the next four years additional funding has been earmarked for "low budget productions" – a piece of news that has been welcomed on the indie scene. Whether or not Danish independent film has caused this is hard to verify.

But generally, studying independent film in Denmark is a new and interesting way to analyse power relations in Danish film productions. And what is more interesting is that the same processes show up in Scandinavian film production in general. The funding systems in especially Denmark and Sweden have a lot of similarities, which may indi-

cate that the system in itself causes certain film cultural developments.

Danish independent film still needs a great success in order to get its stamp of approval from the wider audience. However, the sheer magnitude of the films out there is in itself a very convincing voice to be heard. And some of them are cinematic bad boys crying out very, very loud.